Companions Growing Apart: Exploring Actors' Perceptions with Narratives and Masterplots in ERP Systems Development

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Abstract

Collaboration largely determines ERP development success but is fluid with difficulties. We propose them originating from collaborating actors', such as developers' and clients', diverging perceptions. Identifying these perceptions is difficult as they often surface only when the perceptions contradict. In this paper, we utilize the narrative approach, arguing actors being storytellers sharing and living through narratives, to explore an ERP development project where a client and a vendor collaborate in a seeming well-defined manner. Interpreting the actors' narratives and masterplots shows that they contradict each other. We argue this resulting from the parties' different perceptions on collaboration, and their unaligned masterplots. This also explains severe problems in the project and illustrates narratives and masterplots as useful for uncovering the actors' underlying perceptions, driving their actions.

1. Introduction

In modern enterprise resources planning (ERP) systems development projects several actors unite their forces for a shared purpose [1]–[4]. The systems are increasingly acquired as software packages from the systems vendors [5]–[11]. The key actors are the users and the system developers, and their respective organizations. This refers to a client organization for whose usage the system will be implemented, and a vendor driving the technical development. Their collaborations' seamlessness largely determines the overall project success [3], [12].

ERP development projects are famous for the system's customization difficulties, dilemmas in integrations, lack of business requirements understanding, insufficient change management, inadequate data quality, IT-business misalignments, budget ambiguities, and lack of managerial support [13]–[16]. Often these problems result from highly complex cooperation between the actors [17]. Too often a project, which was initially meant to be a straightforward system deployment, ends up with quickly escalating problems [18], [19]. Problems have been identified earlier. For example [14], [17], [20]–[23] all identify central issues. The majority of the ERP systems development projects' problems seem to arise from the collaboration between the actors [4], [17], [24], [25].

Yet it remains unclear why collaboration often faces these problems. It seems that research has not explicitly considered the participants, their backgrounds and stances towards inter-organizational *collaboration*. The actors' perceptions are emphasized as they initiate, guide, and inspire activities in different situations [19], [26]. Perception is "the process of interpreting the messages of our senses to provide order and meaning to the environment" [27, pp. 74–75]. Thus, when the actors try to make sense of the ambiguous world, they, through interpretive processes, arrive at a perception resonating with their perceptual systems. We propose these perceptions as significant factors in the ERP systems development because the actors' actions are based on their perceptions rather than some 'purely objective' reality [27, p. 75]. When the actors share cognitive elements, they share their perceptions and unite their actions. This is illustrated by for instance institutional logics [28], [29], frames of reference [30], [31], structures [32], [33], and IT identities [34], [35]. The perceptions are essentially springboards for actions [26], [27]. For instance socially constructed practices, values, beliefs, and rules a certain professional group perceives guide their actions in different situations [28], [29]. The perceptions, however, are not always shared and especially those of different groups may in fact be contradicting, as the piling failures of inter-organizational EPR development projects imply.

Perceptual issues are difficult to identify. They rarely surface in explicit forms as they are underlying on the actors' subconscious levels [31], [36] and

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perceptual systems [27]. We thus suggest turning towards narrative theorists who are the experts of uncovering embedded information from the actors' interactions. Narrative theorists propose human actors as essentially storytellers who live and share narratives [37], i.e. accounts of series of particularized events occurring over time [38], [39]. When the actors try to comprehend overwhelmingly arbitrary reality, they resort to narratives offering compelling and reasonable explanations for confusing events. Narratives thus convey what the teller perceives and represent an entry point into their world. They are inspired by skeletal masterplots - familiar narrative models inspiring and offering structure for the narratives resonating with the actors' perceptions [40, p. 236], [41], [42]. Masterplots thus reflect collective perceptions that groups of actors possess. Although narratives have been briefly explored in IS research (see [43], [44]) such research is still rare [45]. Especially the concepts of narratives and masterplots have not been used in the ERP development context [44].

We hypothesize narratives as an approach to study the differences in the collaborating actors' perceptions, anteceding the often-occurring ERP systems development issues. Exploring this, we answer a research question: "*What narratives tell about collaborating actors' perceptions in an ERP systems development project?"* We study a case where a large manufacturing company and its small ERP vendor, with a long-shared history, together decided to develop and implement a new ERP system. Our findings show that even though these actors shared some narratives pulling them into cooperation, their underlying masterplots significantly differed and their individual narratives contradicted. We argue this preceding severe problems in the project.

Next we present our take on narrative theories. Then we explain our interpretive case study approach, followed by the empirical findings. The paper ends with a discussion and concluding remarks.

2. Theoretical Background

IS research exploring narratives is rare [43], [45], [46]. Examples include [46], studying organizational members resorting to narratives during requirements elicitation and [47] studying organizational members' narratives for the gain of political advantage. [43], [48]–[50] used narrative analysis as a method to analyze IS projects. These studies show the presence of narratives in the IS context. However, what narratives essentially are in a social and cognitive sense, and what we could learn about their teller's perceptions is left intact and unrealized. ERP systems development is a domain benefitting from this.

Herman [51] thoroughly defines narratives. He conceptualizes them through their prototypical elements and emphasizes narratives as a mode of situated representation emerging in a specific occasion for telling. Narratives focus on particularized and sequenced events prototypically introducing a disequilibrium in the reality the narrative describes. Narratives could thus be seen as ways to organize the world, and narrative as a perceptual activity to organize data into patterns to explain experiences [52, p. 3]. The term narration refers to symbolic actions having a "sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them" [37, p. 2]. Thus, while narratives are a way for actors to organize the world, they simultaneously convey information for others who want to analyze the narratives. As the actors embed their view of the world into their narratives, they leave clues for others about what they perceive.

The actors utilize narratives when they structure their reality [38], [52], [53]. They organize their temporal experiences into meaningful wholes uniting them by the narrative form [54]. In the example from [46], the narratives were used during a system's requirements elicitation. The employees' narratives focused on claiming their organization's difficulties as not their fault. If looked beyond explicit statements, it is possible to interpret the employees perceiving that they had been assumed to be the main problem to be solved with the new system. The example's setting may have been much more complex than what the tellers' narratives explicitly stated. Nevertheless, the narratives as simple and compelling explanations were prototypically tellable and served their tellers' purposes. This tellability and simplicity apply to both the teller and their listeners. Focusing on what is tellable and resonates with a narrative's teller reveals their underlying perceptions.

Although prototypically narratives are about individualized experiences and particularized perceptions [51], the cognitive models from where these narratives emerge are socially and culturally guided. These skeletal structures are referred to as masterplots, "the recurrent skeletal stories, belonging to cultures and individuals playing a powerful role in questions of identity, values, and the understanding of life" [40, p. 236]. Masterplots promote familiar narrative models including some basic categories for actants, basic plotlines and imply a sanctioned interpretation of the narrative's underlying meaning and moral. A popular example is a "Cinderella story" inspiring many storytelling contexts. Similarly the example narratives from Alvarez

and Urla [46], while not explicitly discussed, could be seen to follow a masterplot of technology making people obsolete. Masterplots inspiring human actors' narratives thus reveal cues of unity in how certain groups of actors perceive their surroundings.

To explain the masterplot concept, [40] uses the terms *type* and *genre* by applying them to the masterplot of the Cinderella story. Type is the "recurring kind of character". In other words Cinderella's type is embodied in Cinderella's character, i.e. the "battered wife". The masterplot, however, is Cinderella's *story* and the events it comprises. Genre, on the other hand, is the labelled description of the story, for instance, a tragedy or an epic. Cinderella's genre could be a novel. To interpret what is the masterplot, the stories need to be analysed. Specifically, the unity of the narratives conveyed by stories reflects the masterplot. For instance in the Cinderella story masterplot, narratives elaborating on "a thread of neglect, injustice, rebirth, and reward" reveal the underlying masterplot.

Analyzing narratives the actors use in explaining the events (for others and themselves) thus reveals their perceptions. This stance has not been explicitly taken in IS research. In addition to the presence of narratives [46], [47], [49] for instance [55] analyzed how groups of actors shared metaphors, being aligned with their perceptions, when making sense of an IS project. Yet they did not study how the perceptions influenced collaboration, for example between the client and vendor organizations. [44] showed how masterplots prosper in IS projects, but did not discuss the theoretical relevance for the discipline in depth. We thus propose narrative theories as helpful for understanding how perceptual differences complicate collaboration in ERP systems development projects.

3. Research Approach

We analyzed the actors' narratives in an ERP systems development project. Our approach combines three concepts: collaboration in ERP systems development, the actors' perceptions, and their narratives. Our proposition overlaps these concepts. We derive our insights from a representative real-life case, using the interpretive single case study approach [56]. This is because ERP systems development projects are social processes [57] to be studied in their actual contexts [58]. Our entry point to the actors' social world is through language [59, p. 20], [60].

Our case is an ERP system development project initiated in 2008 when a client and a vendor decided to renew the client's ERP system. The client is a large global manufacturer, having more than 1,000 retail sites worldwide. The vendor is a small local ERP developer, providing the client's old system. A mutual need to renew the system emerged from the client's need for better support to their evolving business processes and the vendor's eagerness to shift their business model from customized ERPs to general products. The organizations decided to continue their established cooperation, renew the client's ERP, and build a platform for a software product.

Fifteen interviews were conducted with central actors from the client organization and the vendor, before the initial rollouts in 2013. The interviewees (see Table 1) are managers and employees, selected through a snowballing method where former interviewees were asked to name subsequent, influential, and relevant people [61]. The interviews, ranging from 30-90 minutes each, included open-ended questions where interviewees were asked to describe the project and collaboration from their perspectives. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Table 1 Interviewees

Client	C1	Business area manager
	C2	Chief Executive Officer
	C3	Concept Manager
	C4	Salesperson
	C5	Sales Office Manager
	C6	Consumer Business Manager
	C7	Controller
	C8	(ex) project manager
	C9	Technical Support
	C10	Chief Information Officer
Vendor	V1	Customer Interface Specialist
	V2	Lead Designer
	V3	Product Development Leader
	V4	Chief executive officer
	V5	IT support

The inductive interpretive data analysis was inspired by the pragmatic guidelines for grounded theory [62]. No theoretical framework was used but the concept of narratives as the representations of sequenced events making sense of the actor's experience [51, p. 9] sensitized the analysis. In line with the open-ended interviews, the issues the interviewees highlighted were assumed to be central.

The themes were first categorized by identifying general areas of interest, such as certain phases of the implementation. Second, detailed coding inside the themes produced descriptive codes. Third, the

reoccurring accounts and explanations inside the descriptive codes were interpreted to form narratives that were labelled based on their teller. Masterplots were interpreted by identifying the unity between the narratives. Finally, the masterplots were compared and findings were reflected with literature. Not all accounts produced prototypical narratives nor did all the narratives fit into presented masterplots. Thus, the presentation of narratives and masterplots were prioritized based on their occurrence and relevance. The data analysis reflects the time when the data collection was completed.

4. Findings

Initially the project seemed like a harmonious collaboration of two organizations. However, when the project proceeded, communication problems, customization difficulties, unclarity of the system's requirements, budget ambiguities, and misunderstandings emerged. The client organization and the vendor shared some narratives, used for defining the main project activities. This implies partly shared perceptions. However, both organizations had their own organization-specific narratives revealing their underlying perceptions. Those differed significantly in terms of activities and general project goals. The unity of organizations' corresponding narratives implies contradicting masterplots. Narratives of one organization followed a masterplot elaborating on intimate collaboration to revolutionize their business with a close partner. In contrast, the other organization's masterplot was about an opportunity to become more independent. This implied contradicting desires and created tensions between the actors.

4.1 We are Bound Together

The large client organization and the small vendor had a long, shared history. The vendor had developed the client organization's previous ERP system. Once the client organization business processes had evolved and needed better support, they decided to renew the ERP system. They evaluated different vendors but concluded continuance to work with the same vendor as their best choice. They knew the vendor had "*learnt much about the* [client's] *business domain*" [C10]. The client felt that if they had "*chosen another vendor, the vendor would have spent the first couple of years just by learning the business domain*" [C10]. In the past, the vendor had "*been able to provide functionality that gave*" [C2] them competitive advantage "*with a rapid phase*" [C2]. For the vendor, the client was crucial, being by far their largest client, producing about one-third of their revenue. Both actors told a narrative that history bounds them together, dictating them to continue their cooperation (see Figure 1). These narratives created a bond, pulling them to collaborate. However, both organizations had complementary narratives revealing contradicting desires on collaboration.

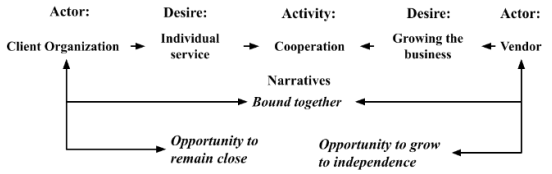

Figure 1 Narrative for cooperation

The organizations' expectations for collaboration diverged. The client told a narrative where the vendor was expected to continue serving them almost individually. The client's manager explained the vendor not being a "*faceless consult organization*" [C10] and it would be easy to "*tailor the system with them*" [C3]. They had become close with the vendor, being able to casually phone about issues with the old system. They felt the vendor almost being a part of their organization, enabling them to develop a new system together, as partners. The client hoped the shared renewal project continuing their intimate relationship with the vendor where they could informally, flexibly, and with low costs resort to the vendor's services.

The vendor saw the project as an opportunity to advance their own business by transforming their business model from customized systems to a software product, developed with a large and reliable client, and then by selling it to new customers. During the project, the vendor for instance "*doubled the number of their employees and acquired more competence*" [C2]. They also formalized their relationship with the client by implementing a ticketing system for requests, and when facing scheduling problems, outsourced some development tasks. Thus, instead of being the individual servant for a single customer, the vendor wanted to become a product owner and seller.

It was not clear who initiated the renewal project. On one hand, the client organization needed a new system as they were losing competitive advantage. Also, the vendor had decided to discontinue updating the old system. On the other hand, the vendor concluded them needing to upgrade their technology and moving into a new business model. The project was thus their excuse to advance their own business. This view, then again, was shared by the client who had learnt the benefits of the service-oriented model. They also had a business intention to shift to the service model.

4.2 The sky's the Limit

First the system's requirements were elicited only generally. Several client's employees participated in this. A client manager described the principle as "*there were no ideas that would be too crazy*" [C6]. The vendor's employee explained that "*when the specifying the requirements, participants were all business people. It started from what we should accomplish, and how should it work. We moved forward that way. That's what we described back then and we purposefully did not spend any time focusing on details*" [V4]. This principle was accepted by both organizations. They shared a narrative that the best way to elicit requirements is by thinking the sky being the only limit (see Figure 2), since, with no restrictions, they could be truly creative.

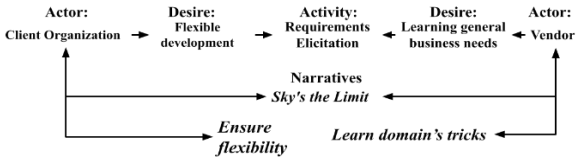

Figure 2 Narrative for requirements elicitation

The client perceived that by approaching the requirements on a very general level, they would ensure flexibility throughout the project. A manager stated that they "*don't want to be involved with a stiff and pre-specified development approach. Never. No thank you! It should be flexible. So that we can later come back to different issues*" [C10]. They thus expected them starting with vague requirements, further specified as the project proceeds. They expected the vendor to continue working closely with them, allowing them to iterate the requirements during development.

This principle was, on a general level, suitable to the vendor. However, their narrative shows that this was not because they wanted to offer superior and flexible services to this client but to learn from the client, enabling them to develop a common product for a broader customer base. They were making a "*general product. Not a product just for the current client".* [V2]. The vendor's CEO explained detailed requirement specifications as "*unnecessary in terms of time management. Now, as they come up, we look at what the world looks like today and what would be the best way to do it."* [V4] They thus wanted to learn the business domain and its future, enabling them to develop a product with competitive advantage.

4.3 Tightrope Walkers Grown Greedy

The organizations shared a narrative that the system is not only for a specific customer but a product. However, the client's expectations did not match with the vendor's approach. This is a point where their narratives diverged. The client expected a system that is customized to their needs, assuming only some parts being generic while the system would mostly be theirs. Meanwhile the vendor was implementing a more sellable product, most of the system being generic and customer-specific issues as handled by changing the system parameters. The vendor's CEO said the system is "*pretty general…We want to ensure that the product is applicable for many domains"* [V4]. They were thus "*making one product…Things that are client-specific are done with settings. We don't have a version specifically designed for them*" [V4]. These competitive desires caused tensions during the implementation, emerging as contradicting narratives (see Figure 3). The client told a narrative where a partner once close to them had grown greedy. The vendor saw themselves as tightrope walkers, balancing with client-specific and general needs, keeping the client happy while still advancing their own business.

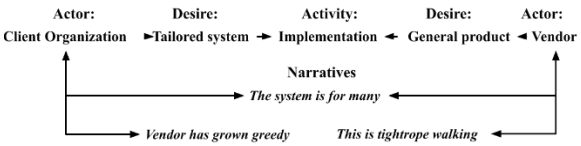

Figure 3 Narratives for implementation.

The client's CEO said that it "*seriously pisses me off sometimes that when we want something to be done and we pay for it, it will be offered to other clients*" [C2]. The client observed that the vendor was not serving them exclusively anymore. Specific functionalities would be charged. They learned that every time they wanted, for instance, to discuss schedules for roll-outs, the vendor would point out its limited resources and ask for "*money, in the name of friendship and help. 250k would be a nice single payment*" [C10]. The client's CIO however emphasized them as not easily fooled by the vendor, not giving "*money just for the sake of it"* [10]. The client elaborated if the vendor's services were necessary. Their CIO stated that perhaps "*we don't necessarily start to code ourselves. But we may take someone* [from the developers] *into our team. Buy someone from the vendor. Or from India. That will be a funny combination*" [C10]. They expected them tailoring the system in close collaboration with the vendor. The client for instance assumed further requirements elicitation through the system's pilots. The vendor instead used the pilots to demonstrate and test that all functionalities were approved. The

client got frustrated as the system development did not proceed as planned. On many occasions, they "*expected that the system would have been more ready already"* [V5].

The vendor underlined them as not fooling their client by creating a general product. They openly told how they were just "*kind of balancing*" [D13]. When the client proposed some features or changes, they were directed to the vendor's *"product manager who will check that it's sensible for the general software development*" [V1]. The vendor's lead designer working closely with the client described that she "*think[s] about it a lot. I always try to keep the client happy. But when there's a new wish from them, I could say that this wasn't in our agreement. I´m still happy to add some little features to keep them happy. You have to balance quite a bit with that"* [V2]. However, when the client started to tighten the schedules, balancing on the thin rope became difficult. The lead designer explained them as being forced to "*rush and quickly hard-code things that the client wants*" [V2]. The vendor felt the pressure and "*worked overtime. Long hours with big crew*" [D14]. They felt the client being used to "*release cycle that's too fast. It was like when you phoned in the morning, a feature might be in the deployment in the evening*" [D14]. The vendor perceived that the pressure resulted in an incomplete and hurried system. The process "*has been too hurried. I am a perfectionist and would want things to be right. Every bug hurts when I hear that there inevitably are some in production*" [V2].

5. Discussion

The findings show two organizations seemingly sharing their perceptions on collaboration. This was evident in their narratives on being bound together to continue the system development and implementation. They were happy with the general level system's requirements for enabling innovation. Both actors also acknowledged the new system being offered to other clients. The narratives indicated a bond between the organizations, pulling them together.

The organizations shared some narratives but their complementary narratives differed radically. The client was frustrated from not receiving similarly personal service as before. The vendor, in contrast, articulated struggles to grow their business while answering to the client's demands. These narratives tell a story of underlying desires starting to pull the actors apart from the cooperation once so close. The narratives revealed the actors perceiving the project fundamentally differently. As the perceptions were so different, it was only natural that the actions these perceptions imposed were not aligned, and the infamous ERP systems development issues emerged.

The masterplots reflect the actors' different perceptions, interpreted by looking into their narratives' unity [40]. The client's narratives unite in their elaboration on them modernizing their business with the new system. In contrast, the vendor's narratives repeat accounts of them growing their business through the same project. Figure 4 presents the flux of narratives presented in the findings and the masterplots they reflect.

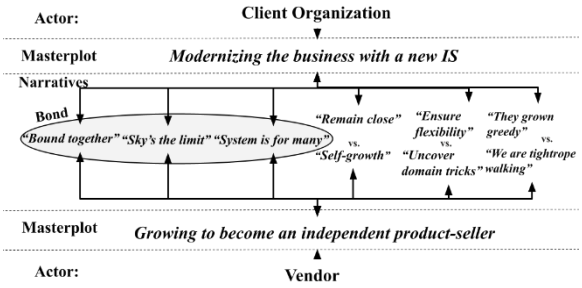

Figure 4 Case narratives and masterplots

Figure 4 shows the narratives of being bound together, the sky being the limit for innovations, and the system being for more than a single customer, implying an area of a bond, highlighted by the circle. The narratives' connections to the different actors' underlying masterplots are illustrated with arrows travelling from the narratives to the masterplots. From the client's perspective, these narratives shared unity in their narration of the project being about innovating a new system with the familiar vendor. In contrast, the vendor's narratives unity was the elaboration on the project enabling them to grow their business. Both actors also had their organization-specific narratives, represented in the figure. They contradicted, highlighted by the abbreviation *vs.* between the narratives.". For the client these narratives had unity in the project being a close collaboration with the vendor, and frustration for learning the vendor's self-interests. The vendor's narratives united in their explanation of them using the project to grow their own business but still serving their familiar client. Thus, from the level of the actor's corresponding masterplots, the masterplots imply contradicting perceptions.

Consequently, only some narratives were shared, resulting from parties having their own masterplots defining the project. The client saw the project as an opportunity to respond to the evolution of their business domain, necessitating ERP system renewal. Their best bet was to execute this with a familiar vendor working flexibly with them. For the vendor the project was a

perfect opportunity to change their business model and to become a player in the packaged systems markets. Having a reliable and large client was essential to secure development resources.

The vendor's masterplots aligns with IS research's description of the contemporary ERP context. The markets have evolved to software markets [63] where packaged solutions are sold instead of client-specific solutions [5], [7], [8], [64]. Simultaneously the vendors have become more distant from their clients and actual users [64]–[66]. Their interest is not serving a specific client, but many [63], [67]. In our case the vendor, once very close to a specific client, drifted away from their client by making their product increasingly generalized and imposing more formality to their relationship. They needed to leverage the benefits from being locked up with a large client to allow their own advancement as a packaged ERP provider. Thus the narratives of being bound with a specific client and emphasizing the sky being the limit made sense. These narratives complemented a view that the system is offered to many clients and fit conveniently under its masterplot of growing to an independent product-seller.

The client's masterplot indicated them expecting a new ERP system supporting their future business operations. The masterplot embedded assumptions of cooperation with the vendor continuing as before. This is understandable because implementations are complex and comprise networks of actors as the users [34], [68], [69]. Addressing their needs with a generic solution is troublesome. The fit between the system and its users is the main determinant for the project's overall success [70]–[72]. However, typically packaged systems do not fit with the client organizations' heterogeneous and unique needs [11], [73]–[75]. Thus, the client's masterplots urged the importance of personalized services. Their narratives of being bound with a specific vendor, and that the sky is the only limit for innovations since requirements will be specified later with the vendor made sense. The narratives increased their belief that while the vendor is essentially a packaged ERP provider, it will still continue its intimate services.

The organizations had different perceptions, reflected by their masterplots. The organizations possessed narratives that contradicted with the others' narratives. When the client saw the project as an opportunity to stay close with the vendor while advancing its retail business, the vendor saw it as an opportunity to safely grow and start serving other customers. While the client wanted to ensure and facilitate flexibility in the development, the vendor focused on uncovering lessons about the business domain. When it became evident that the vendor was not only serving the specific client, the client perceived their once-close companion as greedy, and there possibly being a hoax. The vendor in turn perceived themselves as merely balancing between client-specific and market-generic needs. Their collaboration, which was meant to be bound together, turned into a competition of self-interests.

Gathering all narratives together illustrates the case being a story of two once close companions growing apart. One organization hoped a continuing close relationship with their companion, developing a system revolutionizing their business. The other organization, however, shifted away from the intimate relationship. The vendor wanted to become independent with a new product, demonstrated during the project. This produced tensions between the parties, making their collaborative efforts challenging.

We explored a proposition of narratives and masterplots for learning about perceptual differences preceding the ERP systems development issues. We focused on the overlapping concepts of the development collaboration, the actors' perceptions, and their narratives (see Figure 5). The analysis of the individual narratives and the interpretation of the masterplots enabled us to investigate the parties' perceptions. This provided an in-depth understanding about why different tensions emerged. While it seemed that the parties were executing a textbook-fashion project, the differences in their underlying perceptions were grinding against each other. The underlying perceptions guided the individual actors' actions during the project [26]. When their contradictions manifested, the development problems emerged [17].

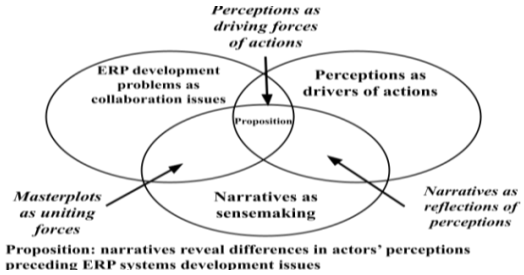

Figure 5 Proposition revisited

This positions narratives and masterplots into IS research, specifically on the theoretical discussion considering human agency, and how this agency operates in relation to the perceived social constructions [49]. For instance structuration theory [76], [77] focuses on the relationship between agents, such as human actors, and the structures they perceive [33]. The central

questions include such as how the actors' actions are influenced by the structures, and reciprocally, how the actions reproduce the structures. As narratives are an integral part of human sensemaking [37], [52], [53], the teller's perceived structures are embedded there. Our findings illustrate differences in different structures: the client perceived that they are in control over the vendor who should be serving them, while the vendor perceived themselves as an independent organization pursuing their own interests. Both organizations operated under their own structures – the vendor expecting individualized services and the vendor working to become a stronger operator in ERP markets. The differences then manifested severe problems that are well known in ERP research [14], [17]. The chain of problems can thus be traced to the actors' own and shared narratives. This finding contributes to the discussion on social structures by showing how the perceptions are conveyed in the actors' narratives and masterplots [44]. Such structures and perceptions that direct the sensemaking of human actors are difficult to be made visible. While narratives as a closely related concept for human sensemaking is acknowledged for instance in organizational research [78], especially in IS research their potential for revealing how human actors see the world seems unrealized. However, as demonstrated, with narratives we can learn about these perceptions, and with masterplots, we see how a collective group of human actors perceives their surroundings. Perceptual issues are simpler to be identified retrospectively once they have created conflicts. The paper demonstrated narrative theories' potential for offering entry points into the minds of collaborating actors. This may aid both IS researchers and practitioners who struggle with the collaborative issues in interorganizational IS projects, such as ERP developments, by revealing more about what kind of underlying perceptions drive the human actors in these projects.

6. Conclusion

We studied ERP systems development with concepts of narratives and masterplots. We explored a proposition of narratives revealing collaborating actors' perceptual differences resulting in the often-occurring issues. We interpretively studied narratives shared in an ERP system development project. By identifying and deriving the actors' masterplots, we learned the actors perceiving collaboration very differently. The analysis revealed one actor as expecting a continuance in their close relationship with the other, and the other actor using the project as a step to become more independent. This manifested problems during the project as underlying perceptions pulled collaboration apart.

This leads to research contributions. Our findings show the actors' perceptions guiding their actions being dramatically different, consequently causing problems in collaboration. Narratives and masterplots reflect these perceptions. We demonstrated how narratives and masterplots can offer an alternative entry point into the actors' perceptions. On one hand, narratives and masterplots were collectively shared. This means the vendor's and the client's narratives were aligned and were reflected in their corresponding masterplots. On the other hand, the narratives contradicted. This conflict provides an explanation for the causes of problems. We thus argue that narrative theories have the potential to reveal differences in the actors' perceptions that precede the infamous development problems. These findings contribute to IS theories of social structuration exploring the relationship between agency, i.e. human actors, and the agency's perceptions.

The paper has practical contributions. The paper implied underlying perceptions significantly diverging during the ERP systems development projects. The findings exemplify the easiness of assuming mutual interests while underlying perceptions may be different, even conflicting. Our example thus motivates the practitioners to become aware of the actors' underlying perceptions when they engage in collaboration. The demonstration of the use of narrative theories to interpret the perceptions is also valuable for the practitioners trying to understand collaborative partners.

Future research could strengthen the theoretical grounding that combines actors, their perceptions, and narrative theoretical concepts of the narratives and masterplots. We merely exemplified the role of narratives. Further research should capture and analyze a much broader selection of narratives and masterplots. This way we can learn more about these concepts and what they reveal about IS projects. When the set of narrative and masterplot examples increases, their comparison becomes possible potentially revealing insightful findings.

The paper has limitations. First, this is a single case study so identified narratives and masterplots should be generalized with caution. Our intention was not to reveal the general narratives that occur in ERP systems development projects, but to demonstrate their analysis. Second, our approach is interpretative. To be faithful towards the philosophical foundations behind narratives, we emphasize that the researchers and the readers of this paper are essentially storytellers

themselves and subject to their share of own narratives. Our interpretations are thus subjective and threatened by misinterpretations.

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